

Betty Yee Tours Two East Palo Alto Schools



1) Betty with Belle Haven Community School class.



2) Betty with Superintendent Gloria Hernandez and school staff members at the Belle Haven Community School.



3) Betty with Gina Sudari, principal of the Costaño School and 49ers Academy.



4) Betty with Gina Sudari, Superintendent Gloria Hernandez, Arcelio Zepeda, and Avani Patel at the Costaño School and the 49ers Academy.

The big sign attached to the front gate of the Belle Haven Community School said, 'Welcome Betty Yee.' It almost looked like a festive occasion was about to take place, given the large welcome sign at the school's entrance.

Yee, who is a member of the California Board of Equalization, was scheduled to tour three schools in the Ravenswood City School District on Tuesday, October 1. The Belle Haven Community School on Ivy Drive was the first school on her tour. It is one of two schools in the district that is located in Menlo Park.

Yee is one of 5 board members on the California Board of Equalization, and she represents District 1, which includes 21 counties in northern and central California. San Mateo County is one of the counties in Yee's district.

According to its website: "The California State Board of Equalization is the only elected tax commission in the nation.... The Board collects taxes and fees that provide nearly 34 percent of the annual revenue for state government and essential funding for counties, cities, and special districts."

Along with the other board members, Yee is responsible for "oversee[ing] the agency's 4,300 employees in California, New York, Chicago, and Houston to ensure tax and fee laws are interpreted and applied correctly."

So, why was Yee visiting the Ravenswood City School District? Yee said that she was touring the district at the invitation of the district's superintendent, Dr. Gloria Hernandez.

"When I received the invitation from Superintendent Dr. Hernandez," Yee said, "I really jumped at the opportunity, because the Ravenswood City School District is one of these remarkable school districts where we have such incredible diversity and really also some economic challenges, and yet it is ... surrounded by the tech community and to me this is really a place that could show some tremendous promise in terms of how we deal with some of our basic inequalities and inequities in our schools and certainly in our economy...."

Yee said, "I have some of our biggest taxpayers...right here in Silicon Valley and in our high tech community and so I was very, very interested in seeing how the surrounding business community and the Ravenswood District are collaborating on dealing with the challenges of the school district."

Yee was met at the Belle Haven Community School by the school's principal, Rosanna Palomo and was accompanied on the tour by one of her aides who took photos, by Dr. Hernandez and Angelica Tellechea, the community school coordinator for the Ravenswood City School District.

Throughout her tour of the school, which serves 590 children from kindergarten to sixth grade, Yee was enthusiastic and her enthusiasm appeared to be matched by the enthusiasm of the 45 sixth graders who met with her. She addressed the students, some of whom sat at desks, while other students either sat on the floor in the aisles or stood against the room's walls. With the adult onlookers, it was an overflow crowd.

Yee told the youngsters about her background growing up in San Francisco as one of 6 children. She explained to them, many of whom raised their hands when asked if their parents were immigrants, that her parents were immigrants from China and that her father started a laundry, which the family ran, in an Irish American neighborhood in San Francisco. She told them that when she started school, she spoke only Chinese and learned English by looking at game shows on television.

She also told the students how she and her brother and sisters helped her parents run the laundry and how she was very grateful for the sacrifices that her parents had made.

When she asked the students what they wanted to do well in this year, some mentioned social studies and math. Quite a few students also called out the names of the colleges they wanted to attend when they graduated from high school.

In advising her young audience, she told the students to ask questions, because this would help them learn and she told them that one of their biggest challenges would be to manage their time. At the end of her talk, the students gave her a cheer by eagerly shouting three times: 1,2,3 Betty.

Photos with Yee, the school superintendent, and her hosts on the tour were taken in front of the school's welcome sign. Given the amount of time spent at Belle Haven, adjustments were made in Yee's touring schedule, which dropped the Brentwood School from the tour.

So, after her visit to the Belle Haven School, Yee went on to the Costaño School and 49ers Academy, located on Fordham Street in East Palo Alto. There she was met by the school's principal, Gina Sudaria, the San Francisco 49ers Academy Student Services Director, Arcelio Zepeda, the Academic Dean of the 49ers Academy, Avani Patel, and several other community representatives.

This time, Yee visited a kindergarten class and had a photo taken with several of the children.

Yee learned that the Costaño School and 49ers Academy, which serves 600 students from kindergarten through eighth grade, is supported by the San Francisco 49ers, who give the school one million dollars a year. The school is also receiving assistance from Google, which is supplying the equipment needed to completely run the school's auditorium. With all of the support it receives, the Costaño School and 49ers Academy is considered a fully-equipped school with state-of-the-art programs and facilities.

In speaking of the school, Yee said, "There is nothing lacking here."

As the small group walked through the school, Zepeda told Yee, "I grew up in this neighborhood and I've never seen anything like this....For decades, this school was known as a below par school...We've changed the culture of the school," he said.

"All of the schools in East Palo Alto should be like Costano," Hernandez said.

As the tour came to a close, everyone in the tour group seemed energized and encouraged by Yee's visit and the informal exchange of ideas that took place during the tour. At the end, the group, who was with her during the second phase of her tour, posed for photos with Yee, in the last photo that was taken in front of the welcoming sign in front of the school, which said simply, "Welcome Betty Yee."

By Henrietta J. Burroughs

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